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[Separate No. 139]

# The History of the West and the Pioneers

By Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, Ph. D.

[From the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for 1910,  
pages 133-145]

Madison  
Published by the Society  
1911







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Although the subject of my address is both old and familiar, I have no apology to offer for its exploitation on this occasion. Indeed, what could be more fitting and appropriate at this annual meeting than a discussion of that which has been central in the life and accomplishments of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. From its reorganization under its famous founder and collector, this Society has always been something more than a provincial institution. As a pioneer in the collection of western Americana, Lyman Copeland Draper, coming into the Mississippi Valley in 1852, staked out for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin a claim which extended from the Alleghanies on the east to the Rockies on the west, and from the Great Lakes on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south. For more than a half century this vast claim has been assiduously cultivated by this Society; and the harvests, gathered year after year, have finally been stored in this magnificent granary of Western history.

Draper knew no state boundaries. To him Wisconsin was the West. And so the State Historical Society of Wisconsin early became in fact, if not in name, the Historical Society of the West. Moreover, there is ground for the suspicion that Dr. Draper's illustrious successor, Dr. Reuben Gold Thwaites, has always entertained the modest ambition of making this institution pre-eminently the Historical Society of America. And such, indeed, it is: for the West is America, and America is the West.

By the West I do not mean the Pacific Slope; nor the country westward of the Father of Waters. There is a larger West

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than the Mississippi Valley. I would not even stop, as many do, at the foot of the Alleghanies. I would include the original thirteen States—pausing not until I had reached Plymouth Rock. Thus conceived, the history of the West becomes in fact nothing less (it may be more) than the history of America. Such, however, is only a geographical definition of my theme.

Permit me to enlarge upon this view of the West by suggesting that it is something more than a geographical area—something apart from mountains and rivers and prairies and plains. My thought has been aptly expressed by a recent writer,<sup>1</sup> who declares that “the West has no fixed geographical limits like the South and New England. It is something more than a geographical term. Like Boston, it is a state of mind. There are mountains and rivers and oceans within the limits of which this state of mind is preeminently to be found, but it is to be recognized in other regions as well. You can tell a Westerner as you can tell a Southerner, sometimes by his speech, always by his attitude toward life.”

The best definition of this greater West which I am now attempting to suggest, is briefly this: “The West is where a man is; the East is where he or his father came from.” The West is the frontier; it stands for the latest epoch, the most recent stage in the progressive history of mankind. The West is vitality, progress, “creation personified.” Thus the history of the West becomes the story of evolving, developing, progressive mankind—the story of the pioneers, to which America has contributed the latest chapter. “As a locality the West may be shifting, but as a state of mind it is America in the making.”

I am now prepared to say, without fear of being misunderstood, that Columbus was the first of the pioneers in American history—the first great Westerner. His attitude toward life, his loyalty to a vision, his determination, his persistence, his daring, venturesome spirit are all characteristic of the frontiersman. He led the way to a new world—a western hemisphere. He was followed by a multitude of pioneers in navigation, discovery, and exploration. The Cabots, Vasco de Gama, Cartier, Hudson, De Soto, Gilbert, Magellan, Cortez, Nicolet, Father Marquette, La Salle, George Rogers Clark, and Lewis and Clark were all men who turned their faces westward.

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Today*, vii. No. 2, p. 117.

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The Pilgrims in Massachusetts and the founders of Jamestown in Virginia were frontiersmen. Roger Williams in the wilderness and William Penn in Pennsylvania were no less men of the West. The Jesuit fathers in New France were typical pioneers. Moreover, Thomas Jefferson penning the statute of religious liberty is the very picture of the liberal, progressive frontiersman. Likewise the rank and file of the humbler men and women by whom the colonies were settled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were typical Westerners. Indeed, the history of America prior to the middle of the eighteenth century may be characterized as the period of the planting of a race of pioneers on the world's western frontier.

Then came the Revolution, with its call for pioneers in political philosophy. And the response followed in language, now classical in the world's political literature, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government laying its foundations on such principles and organizing powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

And so these children of the world's political frontier courageously declared their independence, formulated their rights, reformed their state governments, and established a new nation among men. And when presently the other nations looked up, they saw that the West had given birth to a new philosophy of political equality and social democracy.

The remarkable thing, however, about this pioneering in America, is not the success of its early conquests, but the persistence of its spirit and enthusiasm. Independence did not die with the reading of the Declaration of 1776; courage did not disappear with the victory at Yorktown: political reform survived the reformation of state governments. The desire for a more adequate and efficient constitution still lives in the demand for a "New Nationalism." No sooner had peace and domestic order been established with the close of the Revolution than the passion for

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the frontier turned men's faces westward once more. Natural barriers were in their way and travel was slow and painful; but faltering not for a moment the new army of Westerners climbed the Alleghanies. Out through the defiles and gaps of the mountains they poured. Out into the Northwest and Southwest they went. Down the winding waterways of westward flowing rivers they floated. Out over the hills, across the prairies, and through the forest they made their way with white-top wagons. Armed with axes and plows, this army of pioneers pushed forward in the conquest of the new-found West. They settled in Kentucky and Tennessee; in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Illinois. For a moment they paused on the banks of the Mississippi, challenged by the Indians who had been promised undisturbed possession of the lands beyond. Before them lay rich prairies of Iowa. The temptation was too great to be resisted. The Indians were dispossessed, and the trans-Mississippi lands were occupied with unparalleled rapidity. The plains were crossed; the Rocky Mountains scaled; and ere long the farthest West was blooming like a garden. Like children pursuing the rainbow, these pioneers for over a century eagerly pursued the ever-receding frontier until at last they dipped their outstretched hands in the waters of the great Pacific.

Some day when our national epic is written, its theme will be "The Pioneer." Some day when the artist paints America, his canvas will be christened "Westward." Some day when the marvelous story of our history is dramatized the stage will be filled not with the kings and princes of the older eastern drama, not even with our own great barons of industry: the leading actors in the play will be recognized as the stalwart American men of the frontier.

Who then were these pioneers—these Western men and women who have given character to American history? It is well known that their ancestors were Aryans—the peoples of western civilization. The first comers to this western world of ours were mostly English and Dutch, with here and there a sprinkling of French and Spanish. Later Irish, Scotch, and Scotch-Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians appear in numbers. The colonies were settled for the most part by Anglo-Saxon stock, and it was by their descendants that our Middle West, the West of the Mississippi Valley, was largely opened up. Here during the last cen-

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tury they took possession of the fields and forests and plains and founded a new empire—appropriately called the Empire of the Pioneers. To know these men—the pioneers, the pathfinders of the West—is to know American history and to understand the real meaning and purpose of American life.

Characterizations of frontiersmen are always interesting and sometimes highly amusing. In the *Annals of Congress* the debates on the public lands, frontier protection, the Indians, internal improvements, and territorial government bristle with eulogy and denunciation. Declared John Randolph in 1824: “Sir, our brethren of the West have suffered, as our brethren throughout the United States, from the same cause, although with them the cause exists in an aggravated degree \* \* \* by a departure from the industry, the simplicity, the economy and the frugality of our ancestors. They have suffered from a greediness of gain, that has grasped at the shadow while it has lost the substance—from habits of indolence, of profusion, of extravagance \* \* \* from a miserable attempt at the shabby genteel, which only serves to make our poverty more conspicuous.”

The Western country, he said,<sup>2</sup> is a land “where any man may get beastly drunk for three pence sterling \* \* \* where every man can get as much meat and bread as he can consume, and yet spend the best part of his days and nights too, perhaps, on tavern benches, or loitering at the cross-roads asking the news \* \* \* a country with countless millions of wild land and wild animals besides.” On another occasion the Virginia statesman declared that he “had as lief be a tythe-proctor in Ireland, and met on a dark night in a narrow road by a dozen white-boys or peep-of-day boys, or hearts of oak, or hearts of steel, as an exciseman in the Alleghany mountains, met, in a lonely road, or by-place, by a backwoodsman, with a rifle in his hand.” And he ridiculed the people of the West as “men in hunting shirts, with deer-skin leggings and moccasins on their feet \* \* \* men with rifles on their shoulders, and long knives in their belts, seeking in the forest to lay in their next winter’s supply of bear-meat.”

In reply to this unfriendly characterization of the pioneers, Representative Letcher of Kentucky informed the House<sup>3</sup> that

<sup>2</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 18th Cong. 1st sess. (1824) pp. 1298, 2364.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2522.

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John Randolph was "most grossly and inexcusably ignorant of the character, the feelings, the intelligence, and the habits, of the Western people. Sir, with the utmost frankness, I admit, their external appearance is not the most fashionable and elegant kind; they are not decorated in all the style, the gaiety, and the taste, of a dandy of the first water. Their means are too limited and their discretion is too great, I trust, for the indulgence of such foppery and extravagance \* \* \* but I beg of you to do justice to their private virtues, to allow them, at least, a character for integrity of motive, for benevolence of heart \* \* \*. Their hospitality is without ostentation, without parade, without hypocrisy."

John C. Calhoun once stated on the floor of Congress that he had been informed that the Western country had been seized upon by a lawless body of armed men. Clay had received information of the same nature. Murry of Maryland referred to the frontiersmen as semi-savages "who press forward into the deeper wilderness, by the new waves of advancing population and live the life of savages without their virtues." While Senator Ewing (from Ohio) declared that he would not object to giving each rascal who crossed the Mississippi one thousand dollars in order to get rid of him.

Nor were the views expressed by these members of Congress uncommon in that day. They represent the attitude of a very considerable number of men throughout the East and South, who looked upon the pioneers in general as a "lawless rabble" on the outskirts of civilization. To them the first settlers, or squatters, were "lawless intruders" and "idle and profligate characters."

On the other hand, many glowing eulogies have been pronounced upon the people of the West. Indeed, we are fully assured by those who frequented the frontier and were personally acquainted with the pioneers that as a class they were neither idle, nor ignorant, nor vicious. They were representative pioneers than whom, Benton declared, "there was not a better population on the face of the earth." They were of the best blood and ranked as the best sons of the whole country. They were young, strong, and energetic men—hardy, courageous, and adventurous. Caring little for the dangers of the frontier, they extended civilization, reclaimed for the industry of the world vast prairies and forests and deserts, and defended the settled country against the Indians.



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The pioneers were religious but not ecclesiastical. They lived in the open and looked upon the relations of man to nature with an open mind. To be sure their thoughts were more on "getting along" in this world than upon the "immortal crown of the Puritan." But in their recollections we are told that in the silent forest, in the broad prairie, in the deep blue sky, in the sentinels of the night, in the sunshine and in the storm, in the rosy dawn, in the golden western sunset, and in the daily trials and battles of frontier life they too saw and felt the Infinite.

Nor is it a matter of surprise that the pioneers of the West should possess fundamental elements of character. In the first place only strong and independent souls ventured to the frontier. A weaker class could not have hoped to endure the toils, the labors, the pains, and the loneliness of pioneer life; for the hardest and at the same time most significant battles of the nineteenth century were fought in the winning of the West. The frontier called for men with large capacity for adaptation—men with flexible, dynamic natures. Especially did it require men who could break with the past, forget traditions, and easily discard inherited political and social ideas. The key to the character of the pioneer is the law of the adaptation of life to environment. The pioneers were what they were, largely because the conditions of frontier life made them such. They were sincere because their environment called for an honest attitude. Having left the comforts of their old homes, travelled hundreds and thousands of miles, entered the wilderness, and endured the privations of the frontier, they were serious-minded. They came for a purpose, and therefore were always doing something. Even to this day, their ideals of thrift and frugality pervade our Western commonwealths.

And so the strong external factors of the West brought into American civilization elements distinctively American—liberal ideas and democratic ideals. The broad rich prairies of Iowa and Illinois somehow seem to have broadened men's views and fertilized their ideas. Said Stephen A. Douglas: "I found my mind liberalized and my opinions enlarged when I got out on these broad prairies, with only the heavens to bound my vision, instead of having them circumscribed by the narrow ridges that surrounded the valley [in Vermont] where I was born."

Speaking to an Iowa audience, Governor Kirkwood once said:

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"We are rearing the typical Americans, the Western Yankee if you choose to call him so, the man of grit, the man of nerve, the man of energy, the man who will some day dominate this empire of ours."

Nowhere did the West exert a more marked influence than in the domain of politics. It freed men from traditions. It gave them a new and more progressive view of political life. Henceforth they turned with impatience from historical arguments and legal theories to a philosophy of expediency. Government, they concluded, was after all a relative affair.

"Claim rights" were more important to the pioneer of the West than "state rights." The nation was endeared to him; and he freely gave his first allegiance to the government that sold him land for \$1.25 per acre. He was always *for the Union*, so that in after years men said of one of the commonwealths he founded: "Her affections, like the rivers of her borders, flow to an inseparable Union."

But above all the frontier was a great leveler. The conditions of life there were such as to make men plain, common, unpretentious, genuine—"An empire of wheat and corn and hogs and cattle does not suggest late dinners and late rising. \* \* \* Pioneers may not always be fraternal, but they still call each other by their Christian names. They are still too close to nature and still too possessed of the enthusiasm which belongs to men who have conquered in a hand to hand battle with nature to bother with social distinctions. \* \* \* [On the frontier] it is expected that every man will work. The unemployed, whether rich or poor, migrated."<sup>4</sup> The frontier fostered the sympathetic attitude. It made men really democratic—"Not the Democracy of the doctrinaire who worships the Declaration of Independence and keeps 'servants,' but that democracy of practice which sees a partner in every man and woman who is accomplishing something."

In matters political, the frontier fostered the three-fold ideal of equality, which constitutes the essence of American democracy in the nineteenth century, namely:

Equality before the Law,  
Equality in the Law,  
Equality in making the Law.

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<sup>4</sup> *The World Today*, vii, No. 2, p. 118.

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The pioneers of the Middle West may not have originated these ideals. The first, equality before the law, is claimed emphatically as the contribution of the Puritan. But the vitalizing of these ideals—this came from the frontier as the great contribution of our Mississippi Valley pioneers.

Now the courageous pioneers who in the nineteenth century crossed half a continent to make homes in the Mississippi Valley must, it seems to me, have realized, as they blazed their names on primeval oaks or drove their stakes deep into the prairie land, that their lives were, indeed, part of a great movement which would in time become truly historic. They must have felt that their experience on the frontier would some day form the opening chapter in the political history of great Western commonwealths.

There was certainly some ground for this feeling. For many rare and inspiring experiences were in store for those who ventured to the border line of civilization. The beauties of nature untouched were theirs; and theirs, too, was the freedom of opportunity. During the lifetime of a single generation they often beheld the evolution of a community of men and women from a few simple families to a complex society; and as participants in that social and political transformation they successfully established and maintained law and order on the frontier. These early settlers founded social and political institutions. They participated in the organization and administration of territorial government. Earnestly they mingled their labors with the virgin soil of the richest prairies of all America. Beneath their eyes a thousand hills were stripped of forests, and millions of acres of prairie land were turned into grain fields. But the hardships and privations which the men and women of the frontier endured remain largely untold.

With their axes and plows they had bravely fought the battles of the frontier; and when they had begun to enjoy the fruits of victory, they loved to tell the story of "the early days." And the oft-repeated tale crystallized into local tradition. At the fireside they lived over again the history of their lives. The hardships and privations through which *they* had passed, but in the midst of which many of their comrades had fallen, were now endeared to them. They were proud of the great commonwealths they had founded. And as they reviewed the past, the marvel-

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lous transformations which they had witnessed stirred their imaginations. They felt that somehow their own humble, modest lives had really been a part of history—the history of a community, the history of a commonwealth, the history of a nation, the history of human progress. And so they resolved to preserve “the memory of the early pioneers.” by establishing state and local historical societies.

Thrice fathers—fathers of the frontier, fathers of the territory, fathers of the state—the unschooled pioneers of our western commonwealths became the fathers of our local provincial history. Or, to change the figure a bit, in the organization of historical societies, state and local, the pioneers sowed the seeds of a local history which have grown and matured into ripened grain. To gather the harvest and withal to sift the grain is the duty of the present hour.

And behold, in our very midst the scholarly work of grain sifting is already under way. To be sure the beginnings are small, and the efforts are sometimes feeble. But “let us not be so foolish as to despise [the day of beginnings], the day of what is called small things. As well might we hold in contempt [the springtime and] the humble office of putting seed into the ground.”

The establishment of state and local historical societies and the promotion of the interests of state and local history constitute in themselves a pioneer movement. Time was when little if any attention was given to state and local affairs. Nearly every subject was viewed from the national standpoint, the history of our states and local communities not being regarded of any special importance. This has been the attitude of most of our American historians. They have been ambitious to discover the origin, note the progress, and declare the results of the marvellous growth of the New World. At the same time it is strangely true that the real meaning of this interesting drama has scarcely anywhere been more than suggested. A closer view reveals the fact that all of the documents themselves have not yet been edited, nor the narrative fully told. At present there is not a chapter of our history which is wholly written, though the manuscript of the authors is already worn with erasures.

To be sure, Bancroft has written exhaustively of the colonies; Fiske has illuminated the Revolution; Frothingham has narrated

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the rise of the republic; Parkman has vividly pictured events in the Northwest; McMaster has described the life of the people; Von Holst has emphasized the importance of slavery; Thwaites has edited the *Jesuit Relations*; and a host of others have added paragraphs, chapters, monographs, and volumes to the fascinating story of the birth and development of a democratic nation. But where, let me ask, are the classics of our local history? Who are the historians of the towns, the counties, and the commonwealths?

These questions at once reveal great gaps in our historical literature on the side of the local communities. James Bryce has likened the history of our states to "a primeval forest, where the vegetation is rank and through which scarcely a trail has been cut." And yet before the real import of American democracy can be divined, this forest of state and local history must be explored and the underbrush cleared away.

Now I trust that I am not misunderstood in these observations upon the importance of local history. I am not making a plea for narrow localism. On the contrary I am endeavoring to suggest a broader view of our national life by pointing to the very source and inspiration of our social and political ideals. For in my opinion nothing is more misleading than the inference, which is so commonly drawn from works on American history, that the life of our nation is summed up in census reports, journals of Congress, and in the archives of the departments at Washington.

The real life of the American nation spreads throughout forty-eight commonwealths. It is lived in the very commonplaces of the shop, the factory, the store, the office, in the mine, and on the farm. Through the commonwealths the life and spirit of the nation are best expressed. And every local community, however humble, participates in the formation and expression of that life and spirit.

An appreciation of these facts has within recent times given to the study of American history a new perspective; and we are beginning to study our history from the bottom up instead of from the top down. The family, the clan, the tribe, the nation—this is the order of social evolution. Why not follow it in historical research? To begin with the nation is to study history backwards. And so the time has come for our historians to face about, and take seriously the study of state and local history.

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To do this will be to give us a more generous appreciation of the worth of our commonwealths and inspire us with a firmer faith in our own provincial character. It will deepen our local patriotism and give us a better perspective of the life of the great nation of which we are a part.

To trace the beginning of our Western commonwealths is to recall the frontier, arouse the spirit of the West, and kindle anew the passion for pioneering.

But why? Has not the epoch of pioneering passed? The West has vanished. Twenty years ago it was officially declared that the frontier had disappeared. There are surely no more hemispheres to discover, explore, and settle. The globe has been circumnavigated. The North Pole has been reached. Standing armies are disbanded. All the constitutions have been written. Our natural, unalienable, inalienable rights have been declared. The national government is surely able to stand alone. The slaves have been freed. And the Spaniards have been driven from Cuba. Flying machines have made successful flights. "Out West" is all but obsolete, for there is no more land to be claimed. The border line between the East and West seems to have been obliterated.

Here in the Mississippi Valley the buffaloes have all been killed. Top carriages and automobiles have taken the place of covered wagons. Land can no longer be bought for \$1.25 an acre. The sod of the prairie has all been turned, and the forests have been cleared. There are no more rails to split; no more log cabins to build. No more snakes. No more prairie fires. Social and political institutions have everywhere been founded. The opportunities of *moving on* and being *the first* are no more. The wolves and the bears, they too have gone, the turkeys, prairie chickens, and quails have given place to cotton-tails.

There will never be another Columbus or another Magellan. There will never be another George Rogers Clark, or another Daniel Boone. The romance of Sacajawea will never be repeated. There will never be any more Jeffersons, Jacksons, Bantons, and Lincolns. For the West in history is gone, and the frontier is a place no more.

Gone! Did I say gone? No! For the West is neither an area, nor the frontier a geographical line. The West is a state of mind; the frontier, a condition; pioneering, an attitude toward

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life. Behold the new-born West—the West of social and political progress and reformation. Never were the opportunities of the West more alluring; never was the frontier more inviting. Never was the call for pioneers more urgent than to this field of civic righteousness. And never was there greater need for the bold and daring enterprise, the rugged honesty and courageous frankness, the serious minded integrity of the pioneer than at this very hour.

Then as children of this new-found West, let us cherish the memory of our pioneer fathers and forefathers of the old-time West. Let us rejoice in this rebirth of American democracy. Let us face the problems and fight the battles of the frontier of civic righteousness with the manly courage and integrity of the pioneers. *They* pointed the way. Let *us* keep the faith.

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